

Vignettes of human experience

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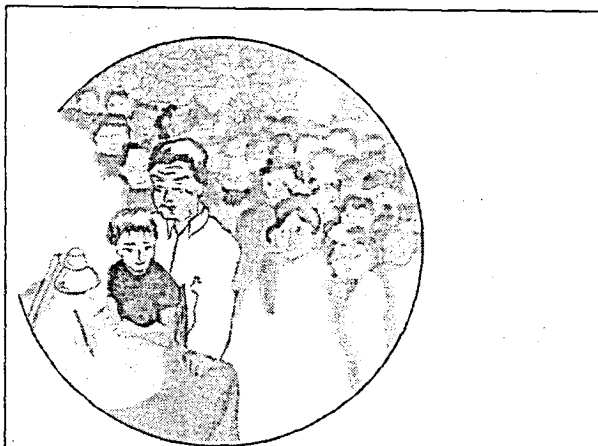
READERS familiar with Serge Liberman's work will know that he is a writer with an acute sense of the suffering often present in our lives. In his latest collection of short stories, he displays a virtuosity with language which lasts long after the first reading. His characters are searching, often misunderstood, lonely people, trying to escape their past or reconcile the present. His palette is full of the shades of despair, and yet, there is a dignity and often nobility about the broken lives he explores.

Although Liberman is careful not to describe himself exclusively as a Jewish writer, his stories borrow richly from Jewish history and culture. He himself migrated to Australia from Russia at the age of nine in 1951, and went on to study medicine, becoming a general practitioner in North Carlton, and his own past informs many of his stories — if not directly, then by providing a scaffolding for his imagination. At the same time, his understanding and sensitivity transverse any ethnic or cultural group.

Liberman's stories are a cornucopia of literary pleasures. This is not to say that they do not resonate with residual pain of the Holocaust, disillusionment, the vacuity of belief and loss. Yet, the author is primarily interested in the way language can represent experience, and some of the pieces also contain deft touches of humour.

In his tenderly evoked, "Messiah in Acland Street", the messianic character, Gotteswill, wants to give a gift to the bemused narrator — "The gift of language! The gift with words to reach into people's hearts, and their minds and their souls."

It is Liberman's own gift with language that holds us in "The Promise", a remarkable story which portrays the tension of two young lovers who pledged that they would meet six months after the war in Warsaw, but who finally meet in the Old Town Square 50 years later. Making the



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reader tremble with the anticipation of the protagonists, Liberman tenderly questions the endurance of love and intervening age. On seeing his former fiancée, the man, now in his 70s, says: "Taking in all this — the dowdiness, the heaviness, greyness and flabbiness that have so overtaken her — I am given to remember suddenly too much, and want there and then to run away. But I stay, and instead I ask, 'Hana? It is you? It is you?'"

One of the most powerful stories in the collection, "The Scar", reminds us of the inexorable link

of the Jews to the Holocaust. But Liberman does not describe this with detailed realism, underscoring his skill as a writer by unforgettably suggesting the pain and suffering of the Holocaust, angling it obliquely off his characters.

In "The Scar", a young boy is surrounded by people who have suffered through the war and are all in some way scarred by the experience. The boy, who is just seven years old, shares the sense of collective history and loss through being hit with a stone, saying: "I acquire a scar on my hairline that I will carry forever. Proof that I too, child that I am, have also left blood in Europe."

Liberman is a writer who is cautious about the way the Holocaust is portrayed, and more particularly, how he, as someone who did not go through it, realises the enormity of this event. Indeed, the recreation of experience through the use of narrative is a powerful medium to convey the inescapable fact that the Holocaust is the single most significant occurrence of the last century.

In counterpoint to the intensity of such stories, Liberman reveals his ability to capture simply a moment of great pathos. In his autobiographical valedictory piece, "Pebbles for a Father", we meet Liberman reflecting on his loss. "This morning, on standing before my father's grave, I had a fleeting wish to evoke a man who, passing fingers through my hair or drawing me nearer to himself by a shoulder or smiling as people smile on a balmy day, would say, using the diminutive of my Yiddish name, 'Srulik, I've never taken you to the museum. Maybe you would like to go?'"

The lasting impression of these stories is that here is a writer who understands the tension between suffering and joy. Perhaps it is his ability to know how others would feel which makes his characters live within us. *Voices from the Corner* is an insightful collection of finely wrought, yet unembellished, vignettes of human experience. There is an intimacy between writer and reader. In these stories we meet ourselves.

■ Christopher Bantick is a Melbourne-based freelance writer and reviewer.